

African Americans in the Lincoln Brigade – Lesson #1 and Resource Pathfinder

This is a lesson for a 9th through 12th -grade US History class. Students will have previously studied the 1920s and 1930s.

Overview - Methods and Strategies

This lesson requires three to five days with 50-minute blocks. This lesson utilizes ALBA's website module African Americans in the Spanish Civil War; see online lesson [here](#).

Students will explore the reality of life in the United States for African Americans after World War I. Through the examination of primary sources and other sources provided on the site the students will be able to identify the major factors that motivated 90 African Americans to violate the Neutrality Act and agree to risk their lives to join the International Brigades.

Students will work in groups of four on a final project. Each student will write two articles (news article, letter to the editor, editorial commentary, or comic) for their group's newspaper.

Student Objectives

- Students will be able to describe the reality of life for African Americans in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.
- Students will be able to identify the major factors that influenced African Americans to join the International Brigades.

Key Questions

- What were the racial policies in the United States after WWI?
- How did the Russian Revolution and the Communist party impact African Americans?
- How did the US economy impact the African American struggle in the 1920s and 1930?
- How did events in Ethiopia impact African Americans?
- What was the United States' foreign policy position in regards to Ethiopia and then Spain?
- Why did African Americans choose to fight in the International Brigades?

Materials

- Assignment and timeline for project
- Access to computers with internet
- Textbook and supplementary material

Assessment

- Homework assignments
- Culminating project

Lesson - Day 1

Journal: Why Fight?

- Would you ever join a fight that you did not start? Why?
- Under what circumstances do you volunteer to join?
- What are the consequences of participating?

Have students share their answers in groups of two to four. Bring them back to a large group discussion as students share two or three of their responses.

Tell students that they will explore the response of the United State to similar questions as we begin our study of WWII. Review US foreign policy of isolationism and the rise of nationalism in Europe.

Have students visit www.alba-valb.org to read [Introduction to Spanish Civil War](#) – Students can be sent in pairs to this site to answer the following questions.

- What led to the Civil War in Spain?
- What countries supported the Spanish Republic?
- What countries supported Franco and his rebellion troops?
- What foreign policy stance did President Roosevelt and the United States take? Describe Roosevelt's [1937Quarantine speech](#).

- What were the International Brigades? ([Formation of the Lincoln Brigades](#))
- What is the [Neutrality Act](#) of August 31, 1935?
- *The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War intensified conflicts between Nazi and Fascist expansion in Europe and the efforts to preserve democratic governments"* Do you believe this statement is true? Explain.

Lesson - Day 2

Journal - What is life like for African Americans in the 1930s?

Have students prepare for this lesson by visiting www.alba-valb.org to read [African Americans and the Spanish Civil War](#). Students can also read an overview of [Race Relations in the 1930's and 40's](#) at the Library of Congress' American Memory site.

In class, have students develop *talking heads* or *sensory figures* to help brain storm experiences of African Americans during this time.

- **Sensory figures** - stick figure with lines coming from mouth, eyes, head, ears, fingers and heart. From each of these lines the students write descriptive terms of what the individual feels, touches, sees, says, hears etc. at work, at home and on the streets.
- **Talking head** – drawing the profile of an individual, the student fills the head with thoughts the individual would have during this time period and speech bubbles indicating what the individual would say.

After completing this task have students meet in groups of four to share work. Bring back to the large group.

Based on students' responses, draw a web on the board listing the realities of life for African Americans during 1930s. Have students copy into notes.

Tell students that of the 35,000 men and women who joined the International Brigades, around 90 were African Americans. Search the ALBA Volunteers Database for [African Americans](#).

Journal - Why do you think African Americans joined the fight in Spain?

Have students share with groups and then with the larger group.

Explain: Today we will try to explore what motivated these brave young men and women to volunteer to fight a war thousands of miles from home.

Distribute a letter by Canute Oliver Frankson ([bio](#), [letter](#)) and the congressional testimony of Crawford Morgan ([bio](#), attached to this document) so that two members of the group are each doing the same letter. Ask students to read the letters and list the reasons why these men chose to volunteer. Share list with reading partner and then small group. In a big group develop list of reasons.

Lesson - Days 3 through 5

Newspaper Assignment: Introduce newspaper assignment on *African Americans and the Spanish Civil War*, using ALBA **Student Handout** - [African Americans and the Spanish Civil War](#).

In groups of four, students will create a newspaper from the time period leading up to (and including) the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Each group will be responsible for a total of **eight entries** into their newspaper. Each person in the group will be responsible for two entries into the newspaper.

Each entry should cover one of the following issues:

- **What effect did the horrors of WWI have on the American public?**
Desire for foreign policy of [isolationism](#) and [a return to normalcy](#).
Enter textbook page:
- **What were the racial policies of the South?**
[Jim Crow](#), [lynching](#), [great migration](#) from Library of Congress, [great migration](#) from NY

- Public Library, [Ku Klux Klan](#).
Enter textbook page:
- **What was life like for African Americans in northern cities?**
[Great migration](#) from NY Public Library, segregation, race riots, economic inequality, [Ossian Sweet trial](#)
Enter textbook page:
 - **How did the US economy impact the African American struggle in 1930s?**
Growing African American middle class, [Harlem Renaissance](#), interest in the [Communist party](#), [FDR's Black Cabinet](#), participation in political process, support for [labor movement](#), [NAACP](#).
Enter textbook page:
 - **How did the Russian Revolution affect African Americans?**
[US Communist Party](#), [Scottsboro Case](#)
 - **How did events in Ethiopia impact African Americans?**
Seen as fight against 'global Jim Crow'
 - **What was the United State's foreign policy position in regards to Ethiopia and then Spain?**
FDR's [Quarantine speech](#), [Neutrality Acts](#)
Enter textbook page:
 - **Why did African Americans choose to fight in the International brigades?**
Letter from Canute Oliver Frankson ([letter](#)) and testimony of Crawford Morgan (below)

Each person must choose **two** of the following types of submissions for their entries. Each group's newspaper must have at least four articles. Note: handout examples of each of these formats from local paper.

- Editorial comic or political cartoons
- Letter to Editor
- Editorial commentary
- News article

Explain the importance of becoming an expert in order to write these articles. Distribute above questions on a separate sheet and make links available to students. Students will break into groups and decide on what articles they will write. The remainder of the time should be focused on writing the articles and completing layout on poster board or through newsletter software available as a Microsoft Template.

Excerpts of Congressional Testimony of Crawford Morgan

Note: The following is taken from the book, *"This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do: African-Americans in the Spanish Civil War,"* by Danny Duncan Collum, Editor, and Victor A. Berch, Chief Researcher.

In September 1954, the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB) were brought before the Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB) in response to a petition by U.S. Attorney General Herbert Brownell to classify the VALB as a subversive organization.

On September 15 and 16, 1954, Crawford Morgan, an African-American member of VALB, testified before the SACB. The following are excerpts:

SACB: Did you have any understanding, Mr. Morgan, before you went to Spain, of what the issues were connected to that war?

Morgan: I felt that I had a pretty good idea of what fascism was and most of its ramifications. Being aware of what the Fascist Italian government did to the Ethiopians, and also the way that I and all the rest of the Negroes in this country have been treated ever since slavery, I figured I had a pretty good idea of what fascism was.

We have quite a few fascist tendencies in this country. Didn't come to the point of taking up arms and killing a lot of people, but for the longest time Negroes have been getting lynched in this country by mobs, and that was fascism on a small scale.

But over there [in Spain] it was one whole big group against the other. It was the Franco group that didn't like democracy. And they rebelled against the people after the 1936 elections and tried to stick their ideas down the throats of the freedom-loving people of Spain. So I, being a Negro, and all of the stuff that I have had to take in this country, I had a pretty good idea of what fascism was and I didn't want no part of it. I got a chance to fight it there with bullets and I went there and fought it with bullets. If I get a chance to fight it with bullets again, I will fight it with bullets again.

SACB: Mr. Morgan, were those thoughts in your mind before you went to Spain?

Morgan: Ever since I have been big enough to understand things I have rebelled. As a small child of three or four years old I would rebel at human injustice in the way I understood it at that age. And as long as I have been able to remember, up until now, the government and a lot of people have treated me as a second-class citizen. I am 43 years old, and all my life I have been treated as a second-class citizen, and naturally if you always have been treated like one you start feeling it at a very tender age.

With Hitler on the march, and fascism starting the fight in Spain, I felt that it could serve two purposes: I felt that if we could lick the Fascists in Spain, I felt that in the trend of things it would offset a bloodbath later. I felt that if we didn't lick Franco and stop fascism there, it would spread over lots of the world. And it is bad enough for white people to live under fascism, those of the white people that like freedom and democracy. But Negroes couldn't live under it. They would be wiped out.

SACB: Were you aware, at any time, that you were a member of the International Brigades, of receiving any different treatment because of your race?

Morgan: No, from the time I arrived in Spain until after the time I left, for that period of my life, I felt like a human being, like a man. People didn't look at me with hatred in their eyes because I was black, and I wasn't refused this or refused that because I was black. I was treated like all the rest of the people were treated, and when you have been in the world for quite a long time and have been treated worse than people treat their dogs, it is quite a nice feeling to go someplace and feel like a human being.